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ABSTRACT

A participatory approach to adult literacy education aims at getting the learner to function at the highest level of responsibility possible regarding program activities; it demands an active approach. Characteristics of a participatory literacy program include the following: activities that emphasize what learners already know, learners participating actively, learners working as a team, learners identifying problems and figuring out how to solve them, learners taking risks, and learners serving as "facilitators" and "resource persons" for this process. Participatory literacy education began in small community-based organizations, where most of the participatory approaches are still taken today. However, the idea is starting to catch on in other segments of the field as well, including workplace literacy, volunteer programs, student writing, alternative assessment, and collaborative planning networks. The participatory approach has shown good results in the growing realization that traditional, top-down approaches to literacy education do not work; more support (moral and material) is now being given to participatory efforts by policymakers and funders. However, obstacles such as inadequate funding and resistance to change are still great. Current and potential supporters of the participatory approach have to be critical thinkers, listen to others, and question their own work. (KC)

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"PARTICIPATORY LITERACY EDUCATION: AN UPDATE"

PRESENTED AT AN ADULT EDUCATION COLLOQUIUM
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLUMBUS, OHIO
OCTOBER 12TH, 1992

BY
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Introduction

Thanks for giving me the chance to talk with you today.

When I first talked with Brian Clouse a month or so ago, he told me that I'd have just about an hour to cover a topic which I've spent just nearly 20 years dealing with. That topic is "the participatory approach to adult literacy education." Experience has told me that I should be clear about just what you hoped to get out of such a discussion, and -- when I asked Brian -- he said that you wanted to (1) "expose OSU students to outsiders (to show they are real people), (2) to expose outsiders to OSU people, and (3) discuss important issues and raise consciousness."

I pressed Brian a bit further and asked him to ask you what kinds of questions you had about this topic of "participatory adult education." He called me back last week and read off a list of questions:

- You asked such personal questions as "What is my background and how has it led to this approach?" A related, broad question was: "What are your underlying philosophies of adult education?"
- Several other of your questions focused on how this approach relates to the adult basic education field in general. For example, one of you observed that traditional ABE programs show little or no interest in developing the kinds of active roles for learners now more common in community-based and volunteer programs. That person asked what we might do to act as catalysts to change those more-traditional programs.

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- Many others were especially concerned how a participatory approach can -- or can't -- work in workplace settings. You asked, for example, whether a participatory approach would be likely to promote "advocacy" on the part of workers . If so, would management therefore see such education as a threat? (One of you was more blunt and said "Some of this sounds socialistic. What roles does socialism play in participatory education?") Some asked whether a participatory approach is something a union might have a special interest in.
- Two of you focused on what skills an adult educator needs, presumably to implement a participatory approach.

I've sifted through these questions and put them into a framework which I hope will both allow me to get some ideas across to you and allow you to share your own thinking on this topic. What I've done is organize this next hour around a series of questions, starting off with some broad questions and then getting down to some more specific issues. I think that most of your questions fit into this framework in one place or another. We'll have time at the end to open up the floor for discussion, to deal with questions not covered in my presentation.

My questions are:

1. What is a "participatory" approach? Its purposes? Its origins?
2. How is it being applied in the adult education field?
3. What have the results been so far (its strengths and limitations)?
4. What actions can current and potential advocates of this approach take?

I'd like to see this hour as an opportunity in which we can, through a process of "collective inquiry," come up with answers to these questions. I assume that you have a fair amount to say about these questions, based on your prior experience as adult educators and on your reading of materials like the handouts which Brian distributed to you.

By the way, this "discussion question" framework is one which I commonly use not only in workshop situations but in the way I organize my writing. It's something I borrowed from my dissertation advisor at the University of Massachusetts, and I've

found it to be an effective way of keeping a discussion on track while also encouraging active participation of the participants involved. In this case, it's a way for me to both preach about a participatory aprproach while also practicing it.

Let me now go through these five questions, one by one.

1. What is a "participatory" approach? Its purposes? Its origins? In 1976 I began my first direct experience in adult literacy work as a Peace Corps Volunteer serving as functional literacy advisor to the government of The Gambia, West Africa. I had no real prior experience in literacy work but had been given the names of a few authors and publications to educate myself with. One of these authors was Paulo Freire and the publications were those of World Education -- a New York based technical assistance organization operating nonformal education programs in the Third World -- and the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts.

It was through my reading of those and related publications that I began to find some words for what I wanted to do. I needed the technical know-how to put together village functional literacy programs in a country with no tradition of such a thing. But I also needed some kind of theoretical framework within which to analyze the politics and culture of what I was trying to do.

It turned out that most of my "education" came from the experience of living and working with the Gambian people, trying to introduce a new approach to education into both a neocolonial bureaucracy and a traditional culture, and constantly reflecting on that experience. I came away from those three years with many questions and a desire to do more of this kind of work.

I liked the "participatory" approach referred to in the texts I had read, and I was told by a graduate of the University of Massachusetts program about the unique graduate program there. In 1980 I enrolled at the Center for International Education and began two years learning from a very different kind of experience. While I did immerse myself in reading the literature on participatory approaches to basic education -- especially in the Third World -- I probably learned more from the experience of being a participant in a graduate program which was itself structured in a participatory way.

A year or two prior to my arrival, the Center had undergone a kind of coup d'etat. Willingly or not, the Center's director agreed to have the program run by a system of committees composed of

graduate students and faculty members. These committees made policies on how the Center was managed, what development projects to get involved in, who was admitted to the program, and the content of courses. Courses themselves were generally run in a participatory format, with considerable responsibility in the hands of the graduate students themselves.

At age 30, for the first time after many years of school, I felt free to take charge of my own education. I had -- through experience -- learned the value and techniques of a participatory approach to adult learning. In short, I was a "convert."

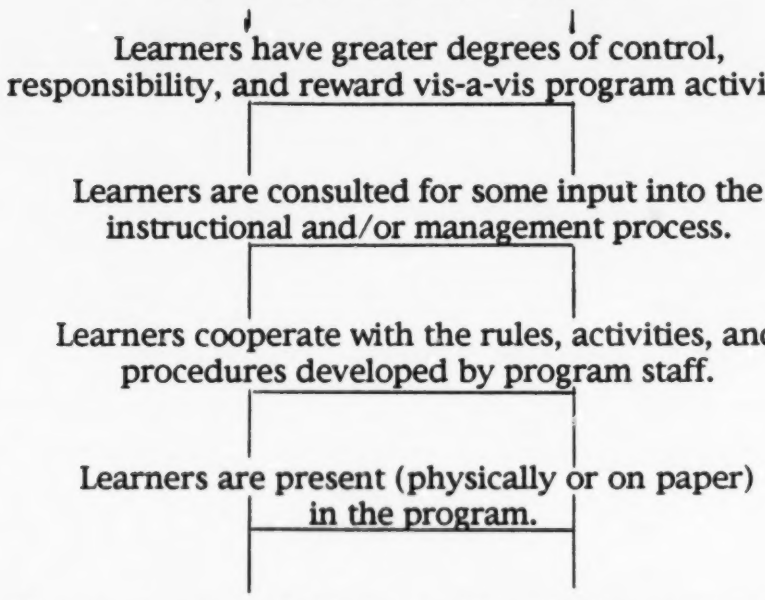
When it came time to select a dissertation topic, I settled on one which combined several personal interests. I had by that time shifted away from the notion of working in other countries and was focusing on literacy efforts in this country. For my dissertation, I decided to examine how the principles of a participatory perspective were in fact being implemented in literacy efforts here. More specifically, I wanted to know what literacy efforts were doing to create new, more active roles for learners. I hoped that, by immersing myself in this question, I would personally be prepared to make a living doing the kind of literacy work I enjoyed.

My dissertation was structured around a series of smaller research questions. The first question, I believe, was "What is a 'participatory approach'?" I assumed, of course, that such an approach aimed at getting learners to participate more fully. But what, exactly, does "to participate" mean in a literacy program context?

This was one of those situations for which a literature review can come in handy. I came across a useful diagram in a reference on nonformal education and adapted it, creating a conceptual framework for understanding what this term "participate" means.

I concluded that there is no one definition of "participation" but, rather, four levels of learner participation. I used a "ladder" format to demonstrate what those four levels were:

Levels of Learner Participation in Adult Literacy Programs


Learners have greater degrees of control, responsibility, and reward vis-a-vis program activities.
Learners are consulted for some input into the instructional and/or management process.
Learners cooperate with the rules, activities, and procedures developed by program staff.
Learners are present (physically or on paper) in the program.

A "participatory" approach aims at getting the learner to function as much as possible at the highest level of that ladder.

But that provided me with only part of my definition. It was not enough to say that a participatory approach creates opportunities for learners to have high degrees of control, responsibility and reward vis-a-vis program activities. I also needed to show why this was being done. Why are active roles important? What purposes are served by getting learners into such roles?

This time I dug back into my memory of a book written by an Indian adult educator, Lyra Srinivasan, and adapted some of her ideas. I came up with three purposes for creating more active roles for learners:

(1) When learners are in active roles, learning is that much more efficient.
(2) By trying out more-active roles within the supportive environment of an adult education program, learners can enhance their personal development through building social skills, self-esteem, and so forth.
(3) And, finally, through development of critical thinking and collaborative skills, a learner can be better prepared to change the larger social context beyond the doors of the program, through democratic social change.

For me, then, a participatory approach to literacy education was one which provides opportunities for learners to take high degrees of control, responsibility, and reward for the program. This was done for any of three reasons: efficiency of learning, the learner's personal development, and/or broader democratic social change.

In practical terms, a participatory literacy program had the following characteristics:

Characteristics of a Participatory Literacy Program

- Activities emphasize what learners already know.
- Learners participate actively, taking responsibility and control as much as possible.
- Learners work as a team: respecting each other, supporting each other, building on each other's strengths.
- Learners identify problems and figure out how to solve them. They use "critical thinking" skills.
- Learners take risks and "stretch" themselves to try something new.
- The trainers serve as "facilitators" ("guides") and "resource persons" for this process.

My literature review dug up a wide range of writers who in one way or another supported such active roles for learners in the instructional process. These thinkers included people from the whole language school of reading and writing education, the usual humanistic adult education thinkers, and the social change advocates like Paul Freire, Ira Shor, and others.

I also found support for the notion that program participants should take active roles in managing the program outside the classroom itself. These supporters of "participatory management" came from the disciplines of community development, community organizing, and workplace democracy.

My dissertation also went beyond theoretical arguments to document actual people in the U.S. literacy field who were -- through the evidence they were creating in their day-to-day practice -- doing most to shape the thinking about participatory education.

2. How is it being applied in the adult education field?

When I completed my dissertation in 1987, most advocates of a participatory approach worked in small, grass-roots, community-

based programs outside the more visible networks of ABE programs and volunteer programs. Those CBOs are still where most of the "participatory action" is in the literacy field today, I think, but I'm now seeing this thinking making steady inroads into other segments of the field, as well. These include workplace literacy, volunteer programs, student writing, alternative assessment, and collaborative planning networks.

Workplace literacy: Workplace literacy became a hot topic beginning in the mid-1980s. What is commonly referred to as "the functional context aproach" was heavily promoted as the way to go in a workplace setting. Advocates of this approach argued that workplace programs by definition should focus on improving workers' abilities to perform job-related tasks. In a "functional context" approach, educators and employers would determine what basic skills workers needed to do their jobs most efficiently, figure out which workers needed to improve which skills, and design and implement a curriculum in which workers would practice using those skills to solve job-related problems.

This approach has been widely promoted in handbooks, workshops, and public and private sector policy and pilot projects. However, a growing number of voices have been raising questions about how the principle of "functional context" is being interpreted. Critics claim that many advocates of a functional context approach are operating on several false assumptions: that workplace illiteracy is caused primarily by worker deficits, that learning objectives can be determined primarily by higher-level managers and outside educators, and that learners' own opinions about what might be relevant to them have no real role in a workplace setting. These critics argue for an alternative interpretation of "functional context," one which doesn't focus in a rigid way on getting workers to "master" a limited number of job skills, but, rather, sees workplace education as a collaborative process in which all concerned learn how to think critically and improve the common organization.

These advocates for an alternative interpretation of "functional context" come from several sources. Many of them come out of community-based programs which historically have served as advocates for learners' rights and democratic social change. Others are grounded in research from the reading, writing, ESL, and adult education fields, research which points to how learners actually learn best. A third set of "alternative voices" comes not from the literacy

field per se but from those calling for a new way of organizing how work is done in this country. This last group argues that, if workers are to be prepared to take new, active roles in the emerging, team-based work organization, then worker education programs should themselves reflect those participatory principles. These advocates of "participatory management," by the way, come not just from labor unions but from a growing number of business leaders and public policy makers, as well.

In practical terms, we can now see these people's "participatory" ideas being applied in workplace programs at two levels -- in the relationships between learners and providers at the "classroom" level and in the relationships among other interest groups.

In the relationships between learners and providers: Let me give you some examples of how workplace programs have created active roles for learners in all phases of instruction:

One workplace educator in California has adapted the concept of "generative themes" commonly associated with Paul Freire. In the early planning stage of the program, this educator tours the worksite with a photographer, taking photos of various work stations, equipment, bulletin boards, meeting areas, and so forth. These photos are then shown to the workers who will participate in the program, and they are asked to interpret the photos -- identifying themes, issues, and problems imbedded in the photos. These topics are combined with concerns identified by management to create the focal points for learning activities. In these discussions, participants serve as problem solvers, working as teams to critically analyze the problems they had identified earlier.

Other programs have adapted whole language methodologies to get learners actively involved in sustained reading, writing, researching, and discussing about areas of concern to the workers. These often include not only work-related related issues but personal issues as well.

In this case, it is felt that learners need as much practice as possible -- "time on task" -- if they are to really develop their skills. For learners to feel motivated, they need to see this practice as "interesting," somehow serving their own interests. Because learners normally have interests beyond the workplace -- such as families, hobbies, their communities, and so forth -- these programs weave not only job-related but personal uses of literacy into the curriculum. It is felt that such an "integrated' approach helps learners see basic skills as something truly relevant, rewarding, and worth using.

Through practice applying their skills to a variety of problems in a variety of contexts, workers develop skills which are strong -- not only "transferable" but actually transferred across a wide range of situations on and off the job.

In the relationships among other interest groups: In these ways, participatory principles are being used to create new roles for learners and instructors in the instructional process. But some creative practitioners are now going a step further to apply these principles to the relationships among the other key players in workplace education programs.

Experience has shown that one of the biggest obstacles facing workplace education programs is the lack of buy-in and support from the managers, supervisors, and union representatives who make-up the other "partners" in workplace partnerships. This lack of support is due in large part to a lack of understanding of what these programs are supposed to achieve and a lack of clarity about what in fact is being achieved. Too often, these key players are left out of the process of deciding on program goals and monitoring progress toward those goals. The result is programs which operate in isolation from the rest of the workplace and fail to attract the real support of important decision-makers.

To remedy this lack of involvement of key interest groups, participatory-minded practitioners have created collaborative planning teams composed of representatives of these various groups. These teams negotiate program objectives, agree on how to monitor progress, and then make informed decisions about how to improve the program. This collaborative problem-solving process parallels the kinds of group learning activities going on in the participatory classroom. In both cases, conscious efforts are made to get away from a top-down decision-making model.

Volunteer programs: When I was writing my dissertation in 1987, I surveyed who in the literacy field was taking a participatory approach. The volunteer groups at that time were for the most part still fairly traditional in their mindset and practice. The rhetoric and structures of these programs too often conveyed a "charity" or "missionary" quality: "We" the well-intentioned would be saving the poor souls of "them," the suffering illiterate.

In 1989, I updated that survey to include in the book I co-edited with Hanna Arlene Fingeret. In the intervening two years, the volunteer groups had made considerable efforts to promote the

notion of "student involvement" in such things as National Congresses, student support groups, public awareness activities, and program governance.

Of the two national volunteer groups, LVA was also making relatively greater strides in moving away from relying on decontextualized "workbook" exercises. LVA was moving toward whole language and group instruction methodologies of the type pioneered by its New York City affiliate.

These trends toward more active student roles in volunteer programs have continued during the past three years. Two places where these trends are evident are the national conferences and the national newsletters of Laubach and LVA. The most recent LVA newsletter, for example, is full of articles about students as leaders, learners as voters, involvement of learners in conference planning, a National Adult Literacy Graduation for new readers, a student who walked across the country to raise literacy awareness, and creation of a National Student Advisory Committee. I know that five years ago such a newsletter would have focused almost exclusively on what staff and tutors were doing, with little mention of students.

Student writing: One other area I will mention just briefly is that of student-generated writing. With leadership from participatory-minded practitioners, literacy programs are placing more and more emphasis on getting learners to write, normally about topics of deep personal interest to them. This emphasis on writing is in contrast to the "old" way which focused primarily on getting learners to "read" someone else's information. These writings are, in turn, finding their way into a growing number of publications -- anthologies, magazines, newsletters, and other forms. These student-generated writings are now being used as reading materials by learners in other literacy programs. These materials give their readers inspiration and give their writers an audience -- a purpose -- for writing.

Alternative assessment: Another recent development emphasizing active learner involvement is that of "alternative assessment." Again, participatory-minded practitioners are taking a lead in this area, trying to develop alternatives to traditional standardized tests and "head counts" as measures of program impact. In "alternative" measures, learners are given active roles in setting meaningful learning objectives and then monitoring progress toward them.

Collaborative planning networks: My final example is what I would term "collaborative planning networks." These tend to be formal or informal vehicles for getting people together to build on each other's experience and to create new directions for the literacy field. The leaders of many of these networks are "participatory-minded" practitioners and learners; the new directions they are trying to create are the kinds of participatory activities I've just described; and the networks themselves are generally organized along collaborative lines, with decision-making in the hands of participants rather than controlled by a few "at the top." Let me give you a few examples:

- The Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education, or "SCALE," is a national network of college undergraduates involved in various kinds of literacy activities in their college communities. The mission statement of SCALE explicitly states that it promotes a participatory view, and the organization itself is managed in a very collaborative way.

- The National Literacy Alliance is a fledgling network of literacy practitioners and learners committed to democratic, participatory principles. This group met last winter at the Highlander Center in Tennessee, and hopes to formalize its structure and meet again early next year. A spinoff from this Alliance is a student-run organization titled the National Alliance of Adult Learners.

- In Boston, there are several formal and informal groups applying participatory thinking to a number of issues in the literacy field. There is a "collaborative" of programs using computers to enable learners from different programs to communicate with each other via electronic mail. Another ad hoc group of practitioners meets periodically to discuss how ethnographic, qualitative research methodologies might be applied to workplace evaluation and assessment. Supporting these efforts are two technical assistance agencies which take an explicitly participatory perspective: the city's Adult Literacy Resource Institute and SABES (the State Adult Basic Education System).

- The workplace literacy inititiative of the New York State Education Department has made a step toward re-organizing

how the initiative operates at the program level and statewide across programs. The initiative's director is encouraging his funded programs to set up site-level planning teams which -- through a collaborative action-planning process -- will not only help programs to stay on target but funnel meaningful recommendations to the director at the state level.

• And, last but not least, the US Department of Education actually tinkered with the idea of collaborative planning and policy development in a national workplace literacy conference it held in September 1991. The Department decided not to follow the familiar route of having program representatives sit and listen to lectures from experts and policy makers for two days. This time, the participants worked in focus groups for two days to analyze what they had learned from two years of Department-funded experience. The participants, by the way, recommended that programs shift in the direction of the collaborative approach I described earlier. The feedback from the focus groups has now been compiled into a report which -- we hope -- will be used to shape more effective national workplace education policy.

3. What have the results been so far (its strengths and limitations)?

Overall, I would say that I am encouraged by the developments I just described. They reflect a growing realization that traditional, top-down approaches to literacy education don't work.

The leaders of these "alternative" efforts are becoming more knowledgeable and confident, based on their experience and on the support they give to each other. These leaders are no longer limited to a handful of better-known writers, valuable as their leadership has been. The new leaders include practitioners from a wide range of types of programs -- and learners as well. No longer do "participatory-minded" people have to feel like voices crying in the wilderness.

More support -- both moral and material -- is being given to these efforts by policymakers and funders who recognize their value. This support is going into substantive developments like training workshops, advocacy, a literature created by participatory

practitioners and learners, and resource centers with a clear participatory perspective.

These efforts to build participatory alternatives are not without problems, of course. To say the least, we need more resources to sustain and expand all of these efforts. No one should be expected to be a martyr, worthy though our "cause" might be. Without basic resources, good practitioners and learners are likely to burn out, disappear from the scene, and contribute to a sense of frustration.

Another obstacle we face is resistance from people who either don't fully understand the positive potential of this approach or who simply aren't comfortable with a collaborative approach to education and, perhaps, life. In the first case, the critics might simply not have done their homework and don't know the breadth and depth of thinking which supports a participatory approach. Instead, their understanding might be very superficial. Some might, for example, hear the word "participatory" and automatically think of "Paulo Freire," and assume we are all trying to "empower learners to overthrow dictatorial" power structures. These people don't realize that not only the "Paulo Freire types" of social critics support the notion of collaborative learning but reading researchers and mainstream business leaders and public policy makers, as well. Others might associate "participatory" with "those nice new readers who get up on the stage and tell their stories," and pigeonhole what we do as "nice but naive."

There is also the possibility that this rejection comes not from ignorance but from an informed resistance to change. Some might analyze what we are promoting and conclude that such an approach to education is too labor intensive (on the part of teachers and learners) and too hard to evaluate. Others might examine our position and conclude that we are too great a challenge to the status quo: we are asking for a restructuring of the power relationships imbedded not only in literacy education but in the larger contexts in which learners live and literacy programs operate -- workplaces and the society as a whole. These critics might conclude that such power realignments are too time-consuming, or will lead to inefficiency, social upheaval, or other problems. They would, simply put, prefer to avoid opening a "Pandora's box" and therefore resist the kinds of changes we are calling for.

We should be willing to talk with all who question what we are promoting. After all, fundamental to our approach is the principle of "dialogue," a willingness to share and learn from each other. We need to try to understand the sources of resistance which we encounter. And we should also make the extra effort of creating mechanisms -- everything from journals, to conferences, to simple one-to-one discussions -- in which we can talk with those who question our ideas. But in some cases, we might find some who simply aren't willing to talk with us. In those cases, we might just have to "agree to disagree," not spend too much time worrying about them, and instead just get on with what we feel is right.

One other thing we need to watch out for is the "going off half-cocked" phenomenon. While we should be pleased that more and more people are exploring the participatory way of doing things, we need to beware of some enthusiasts who don't do their homework, aren't very patient, call themselves "participatory," and rush into setting up ill-conceived literacy efforts under this banner. This not only can hurt the learners and others they come into contact with, but it makes a bad name for those who are taking the time to do good work.

4. What actions can current and potential advocates of this approach take?

To wrap this up and get to the question of what current and potential supporters of a participatory alternative can do, let me say first: "Don't be dogmatic." To be truly participatory, we have to be critical thinkers, willing to listen to others, and willing to question our own work.

We also need to continually do our homework and build on each other's experience. For faculty and students in a graduate program, this means tracking down what has been written on this subject, relying on databases developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Boston's Adult Literacy Resource Institute, and a few other sources. It also means going out and talking to people who are already doing this work, and doing this kind of work ourselves and then reflecting on it. In a graduate program, you can divide up these information-gathering tasks and then share your findings with each other in formal courses, less-formal interest groups, or collaborative research projects.

This is hard work in an area which doesn't get a tremendous amount of recognition. One way of avoiding feeling overwhelmed and isolated is to develop a cadre of likeminded people who will serve as a support system for you.

There's a lot going on in this segment of the literacy community. There are plenty of specialty areas -- like those I mentioned above -- which you can get involved with. In the process, you can not only pursue your own personal interests but help build a more effective and democratic form of education and a more democratic society, as well.

I'd say that this is a worthy cause. So far, I've enjoyed this work tremendously. If you'd like to pursue any of these ideas further, please get in touch with me. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to talk with you today.

Revised 3/10/93